

Swain-Vincent House
824 3rd Avenue, South
Fort Dodge
Webster County
Iowa

HABS No. IA-38

HABS
IOWA,
94-FTDD,
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SWAIN-VINCENT HOUSE

HABS No. IA-38

Location: 824 - 3rd Avenue South, Fort Dodge, Webster
County, Iowa

Statement of Significance: The Swain-Vincent house is important architecturally as a well-preserved example of a type of Victorian house to be found in cities throughout the United States: the town residence built for a prosperous businessman of the post Civil War period. Historically the house is significant because its second owner, Webb Vincent, was important in the gypsum industry in Fort Dodge.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1871.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

1871 Warranty Deed, 5 Jan. 1871, recorded 10 Jan. 1871 in
Webster County, Iowa, Town Lot Deed Record D, p. 371

S. W. Wheeler and wife

to

Adeline E. M. Swain of Webster County

For \$500. Lot No. 6. Block 2 in town of East
Fort Dodge.

1879 Warranty Deed, 29 Aug. 1879, recorded 22 Oct. 1879 in
Webster County, Iowa, Town Lot Deed Record F, p. 603

Adeline E. M. Swain

to

Webb Vincent

For \$40DD. Lot 6. Block 2. East Fort Dodge.

1919 Warranty Deed, 16 July 1919, recorded 16 Oct. 1919 in
Webster County, Iowa, Town Lot Deed Record 18, p. 80

Webb Vincent

to

Kate S. Vincent

For \$1. Lots 6 and 7. Block 2. East Fort Dodge.

1919 Warranty Deed, 9 Dec. 1919, recorded 11 Dec. 1919 in
Webster County, Iowa, Town Lot Deed Record 18, p. 231

Kate S. Vincent

to

Webb Vincent

For \$1. Lots 6 and 7. Block 2. East Fort Dodge.

1931 Quit Claim Deed, 25 Sept. 1931, recorded 30 Sept. 1931
in

Webster County, Iowa, Town Lot Deed Record 31, p. 347

Beth Vincent, single. Boston, Mass.

Harry S. Vincent and Bertha Vincent, husband and wife

Helen Roberts and C. A. Roberts, wife and husband of

Webster County, Iowa

to

Donald Vincent of Webster County, Iowa

For \$1. Lots 6 and 7. Block 2. East Fort Dodge.
1959 Quit Claim Deed, 21 Oct. 1959, recorded 2 Dec. 1959 in

Webster County, Iowa, Deed Record 99, p. 21

Nancy Vincent Nesbit and John S. Nesbit, wife and
husband

Catherine Vincent Deardorf and John C. Deardorf, wife
and husband of Webster County

to

Anne Vincent

For \$1. Lots 6 and 7 and east half of Lot 8.

Block 2. East Fort Dodge.

4. Builders, suppliers, etc.: Not known.
5. Original plans and construction: The house was built for James Swain, but was apparently not completely finished indoors until after Webb Vincent purchased the house in 1879, according to Mrs. Donald Vincent (Anne) when she was interviewed in 1963-1964 (4, p. 1). The plan is substantially the same as when completed. See "Architectural Information" following. The gypsum wall plaster at the walls of the third floor ballroom is of interest. See information on Webb Vincent under "Historic Events and Persons..." following.
6. Known alterations and additions: In 1901 a brick kitchen wing with two second-floor servants' bedrooms replaced a wooden kitchen wing at the north (rear) of the house, as Findlay found in interviewing Mrs. Donald Vincent and her daughter Mrs. J. C. Deardorf (4, p. 1). He was also told

that the owners believed that the present living room was two rooms, but there is no proof of this, only a story handed down in the family to the effect that this change was made when Webb Vincent purchased the house (4, p. 3). The present writer interviewed Mrs. J. C. Deardorf in 1971 and she told him this too, except that she did not have the exact date of the newer kitchen addition. The balustrade details of the stair there are consistent with an early date in the 1900s, in the present writer's opinion. The architect, if any, of the kitchen addition is not known.

From the front of the house one can observe that the second floor window-sill height of the pair of windows above the entrance door has been raised about twelve inches above the level of the other second-floor windows, presumably in connection with the installation of the bathroom there. The date of this change was not known.

Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building

James Swain, the first owner, was born in New Hampshire on 12 Sept. 1816 and moved to Nunda, New York, when young. He studied mercantile trade at Genessee College in Lima, New York, in 1838 and married Adeline Morrison in June 1846, moving to Buffalo, New York in 1854. In 1858 he came to Fort Dodge and engaged in the wholesale and retail drug business. His was the first drugstore in the town. He had built for him the house later owned and occupied by Webb Vincent and lived there until his death on 27 Dec. 1877 (5, p. 270; 7, I, p. 167). It appears that the Swains were

not able to afford their large house and rented rooms to newcomers in town and made their home available for parties, also presumably as a means of augmenting their income (4, pp. 4, 5).

Adelaine Morrison Swain, James's wife, was born in Bath, New Hampshire, on 25 May 1820. In 1838 she was teaching drawing, painting, and modern languages at the Troy Conference Academy at West Poultney, Vermont, and was teaching at Nunda, New York, in 1843. After coming to Fort Dodge in 1858, she taught French, higher English "branches", piano, and oil painting to young ladies. After her husband's death, she was nominated in 1881 by the Greenback Party for State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and in 1884 she was a delegate-at-large to the national convention of the party held in Indianapolis. She was an advocate of women's political equality and was elected honorary vice-president for life of the National Suffrage organization (5, pp. 268, 269). Both James and Adelaine Swain were charter members of the first Spiritualist Society of Fort Dodge (5, p. 270).

Webb Vincent recorded the following information about himself in his "Early Reminiscences". He was born on 13 Nov. 1841 on a farm near Waterford, Pennsylvania. In 1844 his father traveled to Chicago in search of something worth investing in. "He reported Chicago only a slough" and returned to his Pennsylvania farm until 1854, when he made an exploratory trip to Des Moines. He seems to have liked what he saw, for in the following year he moved his family to

Fort Dodge. They traveled by railroad to Dubuque, where the railroad ended, then proceeded overland for six days by horse and covered wagon to Fort Dodge. Their first house there was a one-and-a-half-story-high frame building 16 by 26 feet in plan in which Webb, as a fourteen-year-old boy, took a responsible part in building. In 1861 Webb Vincent enlisted in the Civil War army and served until the Fall of 1864. He worked for the Northwestern Coal Co. near Boone, Iowa, from 1867 to 1869. In 1869 he was appointed receiver of public moneys, and he held the position until the office was discontinued in 1876. He married in 1870 and said that he found the "moderate salary...a welcome addition to my income." His "Reminiscences" relate the founding of the gypsum business:

In 1870, associated with my friend George S. Ringland, I began experimenting with gypsum. We burned gypsum on log piles down in Gypsum Hollow and we cooked gypsum in kitchen utensils on our kitchen stoves. In 1872 our first mill was built and S. T. Meservey was included in the company. The panic of 1873 was not a favorable setting for the new industry. It was up-hill work with not a dollar of profit for eight years.

We were the inventors and originators of brown coat mortar, using stucco instead of lime for the first coat of plaster. It was used in repairing the ceiling of the Merchants National Bank building and on the walls of the third story of my present home. Many a prospective customer has been led up those long two flights of stairs to see it (1).

Large deposits of gypsum are found in the immediate vicinity of Fort Dodge. At first in Fort Dodge, "gypsum rock was considered the ideal building material. Its present [1913] use,

as stucco, was not thought of at that time. It was used quite generally for foundations, and in the construction of buildings." Gypsum was thus used in the construction of the homes of John F. Duncombe and of John O'Loughlin Sr., and in the Illinois Central Depot, and Scanlan's Blacksmith Shop, for example (7, I, p. 172). Webb Vincent's obituary in the Fort Dodge Messenger, as quoted in Findlay's report, gives the following information:

"Pioneer in gypsum plaster manufacturing -- now national in extent -- developed new product (associates -- George S. Ringland and S. T. Meservey) -- Became the Iowa Plaster Company -- prospered -- sold to United States Gypsum Company." (4, p. 6).

Findlay further quotes an early article about Fort Dodge gypsum from E. G. Morgan's Centennial History of Webster County (Fort Dodge, Iowa, date not given -- probably ca. 1876), p. 38:

We can scarce estimate its value when fully developed, and thus no effort has been made in that direction, except what has been accomplished by Ringland, Vincent and Meservey, proprietors of the Cardiff Mills some two miles south of Ft. Dodge (4, p. 6).

On 1 Nov. 1969 Mrs. Donald Vincent died and bequeathed her home to the Fort Dodge YWCA with a trust fund of \$150,000 for the maintenance and operation of the property. During late 1957 and all of 1958 the Vincent family had successfully resisted federal government efforts to condemn their property for part of the site for a new post office (6).

Supplementary Information

Gypsum in its natural state consists of "elongated crystals white or tinted in color...soft enough to be scratched with the fingernail." Gypsum for fertilizer is prepared by crushing the natural rock and grinding it, but for use in plaster the rock is calcined; that is, heated "to drive off the excess water in order to break down crystalization. It is then ground again." In 1872, when Webb Vincent and his partners built the first gypsum mill in Webster County, gypsum was used in the manufacture of finishing plaster. For this purpose calcined gypsum, also known as plaster of paris, was mixed with lime. This constituted the finish coat, and it was applied in a thin coating over a base. The base was made up of two thicker coats of lime plaster. At this time another use for calcined gypsum was in the making of internal decorations, known as stuccowork. As a result of their experiments, Vincent and his partners, determined that gypsum plaster could be used for the base coats as lime plaster had been used. In 1878 they began marketing the new material, which gained acceptance slowly and eventually replaced the use of lime plaster completely (8, pp. 246, 247; 9, p. 146). Base coat plasters today are gypsum plasters. In addition, the material is used in board form as a substitute for the first coat of plaster, and in board form in the more recently developed systems of dry wall construction that often replace plasterwork completely.

Sources of Information

Primary or unpublished sources.

- (1) Roberts, Helen Vincent. "Early Reminiscences of Webb Vincent." Privately printed pamphlet, undated, 30 un-numbered pages. Reference to Webb Vincent's 87th year at time of relating his reminiscences indicates a date of 1928 or later.
- (2) Webster County, Iowa, Deed Record, Vol. 99.
- (3) Webster County, Iowa, Town Lot Deed Record, Vols. D, F, 18, 31.

Secondary or published sources.

- (4) Findlay, William S. "The History of the Vincent House." A report prepared for a course in the history of architecture, Iowa State University, ca. 1964.
- (5) Illustrated Fort Dodge...Leading Features of the City, Des Moines: Historical Illustrative Co., 1896.
- (6) "Leaves Home, \$150,000, To Fort Dodge YWCA." Des Moines Register, 12 Apr. 1970, p. 3-T.
- (7) Pratt, H. M. History of Fort Dodge and Webster County, Iowa. 2 vols. Chicago: Pioneer Publishing Co., 1913.
- (8) Welch, F. A. "Cement and Gypsum Products of Iowa." Midland Schools, XLIV (March 1930), 245-247.
- (9) Wilder, Frank A. "Geology of Webster County." Iowa Geological Survey, XII (1901), 63-191.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Note: Information not obtained by the writer's own observation is indicated by footnotes in parentheses referring to sources noted under the "Historical Information."

Condition of Fabric

Excellent

Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: 36'-9" wide and 66'-9" deep, in plan.
2. Number of bays: not applicable.
3. Number of stories: two stories and a mansard attic third story and a cellar.
4. Layout shape: rectangle with adjoining, smaller rectangle at rear.
5. Foundation: limestone.
6. Wall construction, finish, color: red brick. Windows are spanned by brick arches, segmental at first floor and semicircular at second floor. The brick is soft and the mortar contains a high percentage of lime (4, p. 2).
7. Structural system: brick bearing walls for exterior walls and bearing partitions. At cellar the header seen at west face of entrance hall fireplace base contains two tenons that pass through the abutting joist and are secured by means of one treenail passing through both tenons.
8. Porches: at the front (south side) and turning around a portion of the west side there is a wooden porch with slender square wooden columns ornamented with moldings. The porch roof is nearly flat. At the rear portion of

the house a lattice-enclosed porch opens off the pantry. Porch woodwork is painted dark green.

9. Chimneys: brick.
10. Doorways and doors: the entrance door is thick with heavy raised moldings around its panels and has a storm door outside. Both doors are paired.
11. Windows and shutters: windows are wooden sash, 1/1 or 4/4, round or segmental arched; or in the attic, oval, one pane. The 4/4 are in the kitchen wing. Shutters are built into the interior reveals of the principal rooms, and some of the panels of these shutters are solid and some contain slats. Exterior window sills are stone. Window sash are painted dark green.
12. Roof shape and covering: the roof shape of the main portion is a mansard and the steeply-sloping sides are roofed in tiles that appear to be metal painted dark red. The kitchen-wing roof is hipped, of low pitch.
13. Cornice, eaves: the cornice is of shaped, sheet-metal "cornice work" painted dark green.
14. Dormers: same material, finish, and construction as cornice.

Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Findlay's report includes line-diagram floor plans (4). First floor. One enters at the left side of the front of the house into a long reception hall. The stairway ascends along the left-hand wall. Beyond the reception room is a small sitting room. To the right of

the reception hall is the living room and to the rear of that is the dining room. Both living room and hall have their narrow dimension across the width of the house.

The rear wing contains a pantry next to the dining room and a kitchen beyond this and has a servants' stairway at the northwest corner (rear left). The second floor has three bedrooms along the east (right) side of the house and bathrooms at the front and rear ends of the hall.

The rear wing contains two servants' bedrooms along its east side. The third floor contains a ballroom along the full east side of the main portion of the house and two storage rooms. The roof of the kitchen wing is low, so there is no attic there.

2. Stairways: The principal stair rises in one flight per story. The first-floor ceiling height is 14 feet and the second is 12 feet, so the flights are long (4, p. 3). The balustrade is varnished oak in natural color with turned balusters. The stair ends have scroll work decoration at the stringer.
3. Flooring: At the main floor principal rooms and the second floor hallway the floors are oak. The boards are laid in elaborate patterns in the living and dining rooms. The front bedroom floor is maple.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, wallpapered, in general. The ballroom walls are gypsum plaster, according to Webb Vincent, a material which he and his business partners

invented (1). See Webb Vincent under "Historical Events and Persons..." preceeding.

5. Doorways and doors: Doors and frames are pine painted a dark brown. Many of the doors are segmental arched. The typical panel arrangement of the principal doors is three panels high and two panels wide. The middle panels are about three times the height of the others and are semicircular at the top and bottom.
6. Special decorative features, trim, and cabinet work:
The interior blinds were mentioned in connection with windows in the description of the exterior. The baseboards match the door trim. There is a thick molding at the top of the walls in the principal rooms painted to match the ceiling. The living room mantel is wood with colored tiles surrounding the fireplace. In the sitting room is a small fireplace with tiles at its face that depict scenes from children's stories. These tiles are very beautifully done.
7. Notable hardware: Typical for the period.
8. Mechanical equipment: Modern heating, plumbing, and electric lighting.

Site and Surroundings

1. The house is on the southeast corner of a block of which the rest of the space is taken up by parking lots and a recently-built U.S. Post Office. However, across the street from the house and along 3rd avenue south to the east are many other fine, large old homes of the period

preceeding World War I or earlier. The street appears to have been the location of the homes of many wealthy citizens of Fort Dodge.

2. Historic landscape design: There is a clipped hedge around the lot and there are tall, old shade trees.
3. Outbuildings: A recent double garage is located at the rear of the lot.

Prepared by Wesley I. Shank
Iowa State University 1972

Reviewed for HABS by Druscilla J. Null 1983